

As universities push their focus further into knowledge transfer, the competing aims of higher education institutions can resemble a three-ring circus. **Debbie Lock** (http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/blog-contributors/#Debbie_Lock) examines the 'third mission' of HEIs and questions what architecture is needed to adequately support the evolving priorities of the higher education sector.



A fairground attraction

No matter how unpalatable it may be, universities are now in the business of selling knowledge in a highly competitive market and to be successful, we need infrastructures that accelerate knowledge exchange and exploitation. This 'third mission' is underpinned by the notion that once created, knowledge should be transferred, exchanged and disseminated. There is little doubt that the originator of this knowledge transfer paradigm has been government and is based on the belief that by unlocking the knowledge that exists within universities and research organisations, researchers will contribute more to UK economic prosperity.

The Ring Masters

The Ring Masters or, the university vice chancellors, are the leaders of multi-million pound operations that contribute £59 billion (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2010/hebci.htm>) each year to the UK economy. They are responsible for the integrity of their institutional knowledge transfer platforms whilst ensuring that the scholarly nature of higher education is not compromised. They now need to encourage the diversification of income streams to lessen the effects of the coming funding cuts, but must not undermine the charitable status of their institution. They need to work with business and the private sector to ensure that the content of their educational programmes are attractive to future students but they must not lose sight of the publicly funded nature of higher education in which learning is not just linked to employability prospects but also to self-improvement and self-worth. Finally they need industrial funding to maintain their institution's critical mass, grow their research base and be at the leading edge of new discoveries.

The Big Top: one size does not fit all

Rather like William Cameron Coup, who introduced the first multiple circus ring allowing more than one attraction to occur at any one time, we find ourselves in the position of adopting a similar approach to knowledge transfer (KT) architectures. We need to show off our wares and keep all the plates spinning but we need to do this in an orchestrated manner. The show must go on and our audience numbers must increase.

The spectrum of activity which falls under the KT umbrella ranges from simple business engagement (such as student placements and internships, consultancy, marketing and selling continuing professional development courses) to complex research exploitation activities, for example, setting up academic spin-out companies. There is very little written about the structures that support these sorts of activities with the result that there exists a certain amount of 'forced' duplication. For example, it is not unusual to find a university with less than £5 million per annum in external research grants and contracts income endeavouring to replicate the infrastructure of a research intensive university, without having the portfolio required to merit such a structure. Such 'a one size fits all' approach to infrastructures does not necessary show the acts to the best effect.

Below is my simplistic approach to university categorisation:

- Research Intensive** **External Research Grants and contract (RG&C) income >£50M pa**
- Research Ascendant** **External RG&C income >£20-£50M pa**
- Research Squeezed** **External RG&C income > £10-£20M pa**

Research Modest **External RG&C income > £5-£10M pa**

Research Embryonic **External RG&C income < £5M pa**

Arguably, for universities with a research income less than £5M per annum, the role of knowledge transfer is more about developing business and business relationships, with research exploitation being a secondary outcome. To put it bluntly, in most cases, you have to bring money in to do the research, before you can exploit it.

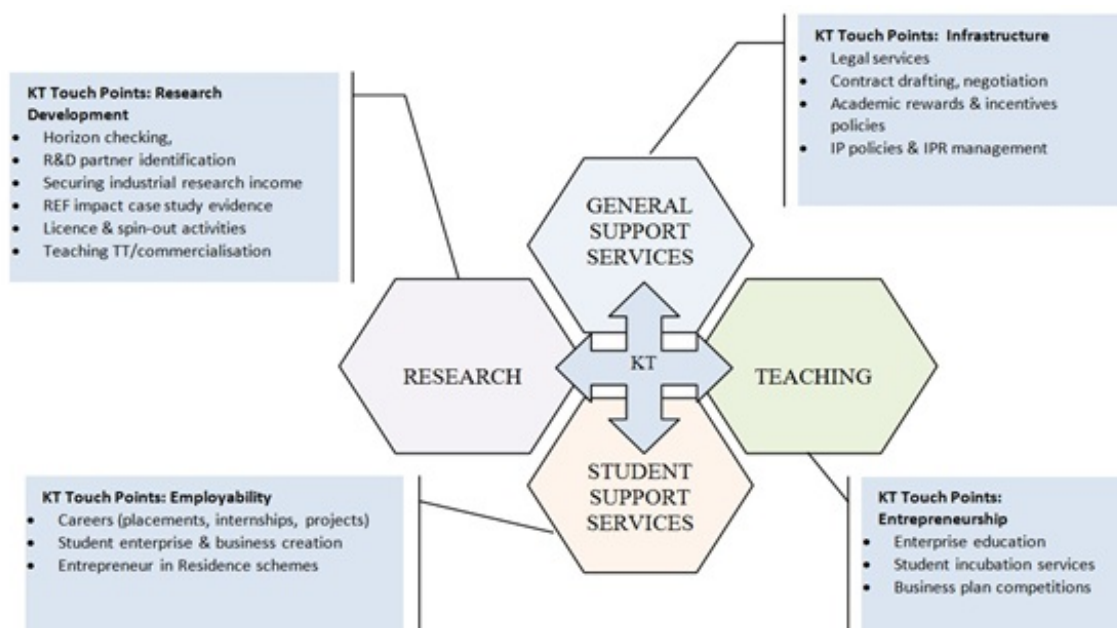
Knowledge Transfer Models

How KT is interpreted and contextualised by higher education institutions defines the manner of its dovetailing with traditional support services. For example, a converged research & enterprise service implies that KT is viewed as part of the research lifecycle. The supporting departmental structure could include staff responsible for research management working alongside KT staff responsible for increasing the amount of industrial research income (horizon checking, partnership development) and technology transfer (IP management and exploitation).

In contrast to this, a university that appears to contextualise KT within a general business engagement strategy aimed at increasing graduate employability prospects may have careers advisory staff working alongside KT staff responsible for student enterprise and knowledge transfer partnerships. Not only does one size not fit all, there is no organisational blueprint that can ensure success, so we need to keep practicing the art of KT until it is perfected.

Governance: Who's cracking the whip?

KT Governance presents an interesting dilemma for academia. The problem is that over the last decade, a group of specialist staff has emerged within the sector to help deliver the third mission agenda that do not have roots in the core missions of teaching and research – the knowledge transfer professionals. Their sphere of influence can be considerable both internally and externally since the activities within which they engage have multiple touch points across the teaching, research, employer engagement and employability arenas (See Diagram 1)



Knowledge transfer professionals can sit outside traditional support service structures and yet be privy to highly confidential matters which in the private sector would be considered as commercially sensitive. They feed into and, in some cases, define fundamental commercial protocols, regulations and frameworks which can have an impact on the working practices of the academic and student communities.

So the main questions are where are the checks and balances? Who prevents the selling of the family silver?

Elephants in the room

There is some evidence to suggest KT services are being realigned together with the closure of a large number of specialist KT positions, but this raises a number of questions, including:

- Is the sector at risk of hemorrhaging the skills required for business development?
- Will academics have their work load models adjusted to allow more time for them to develop new business contacts?
- How much knowledge is being lost by the sector as KT staff leave?
- Will the business relationships leave with the KT staff or stay with the institution?

It also raises questions about strategic infrastructure and service alignment. For example:

- What is the correct balance between central and local services?
- What can universities reasonably expect from KT activities?
- Where does partnership and alliance management sit?
- What is the role of the Business Development & Technology Transfer function in the UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/12/12/category/ref2014/>)?
- Where does student enterprise & entrepreneurship sit?

As I come to the end of my quick whiz around KT infrastructures I find I have more questions than answers. But in the meantime, the show must go on.

Related posts:

1. Knowledge Transfer professionals lead on realising the social and economic benefits of UK research, but their roles are suffering under the creaking economy. (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/10/13/knowledge-transfer-professionals-auril-conference/>)
2. Sharing knowledge and learning through the digital gateway (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/08/08/sharing-knowledge-learning-digital-gateway/>)
3. HEFCE are still missing a trick in not adopting citations analysis. But plans for the REF have at least become more realistic about what the external impacts of academic work are (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/08/04/hef-ce-citations-analysis-ref-realistic-academic-impact/>)
4. Academic knowledge in the digital era: top 5 podcasts (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/10/21/academic-knowledge-in-the-digital-era-5-podcasts-and-videocasts/>)
5. The demands of proving 'impact' might tempt academics to work separately from think tanks, but a collaborative relationship between the two will yield the most productive results. (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/10/06/think-tanks-collaborative-relations/>)